



STRUCTURE

Setting clear guidelines that focus on routine and consistency

INTRODUCTION

Providing structure means offering clarity about what is needed to complete an activity or interaction. Structure is the result of being specific about our expectations, about how things should be organized, and about how things should be carried out. When the appropriate amount of structure is in place, individuals are set up for success and can showcase their strengths.

Structure in post-secondary and employment settings improves attendance and engagement, and completion rates of tasks and programs increases.

Structure at home and in the community can support individuals' inclusion allowing greater participation in all aspects of community life.

A lack of sufficient structure can create difficulties for everyone. Insufficient structure can create confusion, slow progress, and interfere with productivity.

When agreed-upon structure is in place, it positively impacts motivation towards various tasks and activities, overall performance, social relationships, and ultimately supports positive mental health.

Structure can take many forms. Below are some examples:

- Clearly stated schedules, home, job and school-related responsibilities, social roles, expectations and responsibilities
- A planned and proactive approach for unexpected changes and unpredictability
- Teaching and support to break down and complete complex tasks
- Support with organizing a person's day (including break and other unstructured time) and prioritizing tasks
- Specific guidelines for accessible group work
- Giving a person time and space before expecting them to communicate effectively, particularly when distressed or angry.

Offering structure that addresses these areas proactively benefits everyone. It recognizes and values human variation. It reduces the need for individuals to advocate for the supports they require. Committing to this principle means keeping an open mind to structural solutions to problems and proactively anticipating and implementing structural supports when possible.

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES

Provide tools for all people in the setting

For example:

- Electronic tools such as calendars, to-do lists, task managers, productivity apps, goal trackers, specialty apps, how-to videos.
- Create and maintain a work completion schedule with employees.
- Paper/hard copy instruction sheets, step by step instruction binders with pictures, posted reminders and rules, notebooks, labels, checklists, physical organizers, and activity schedules.



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RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES (CONT.)

Create a predictable environment

Predictable does not mean rigid; a predictable environment is one in which individuals know what to expect and that flexibility can be anticipated when there is reason for it.

- Ensure everyone within home, work, or school-related settings are familiar with the space and expectations. This includes information such as daily activities, start and completion times, due dates, specific responsibilities and expectations, etc. Expect you'll need to repeat this for some, and others may require on-going support.
- Provide specific, concrete information about the accountabilities of the individual, along with access to models or examples for independent reference.
- Ensure individuals have access to feedback on their independent performance before independence is expected.
- Create activity schedules and checklists to guide the work to be completed.
- Create and maintain a work completion schedule that provides the individual with opportunities to monitor their progress.
- An employer may choose to maintain a consistent schedule and job duties for employees who request it, even if others rotate.
- In a post-secondary environment, ensure information about schedules and schedule changes is easily accessible, communicated quickly, and by multiple methods (For example, posted outside the classroom, and emailed to students).
- Provide clear information about how courses will be graded. Include concrete examples and specific expectations (e.g., providing criteria for grade assignment beforehand).
- Predictability at home can include using shared calendars, chore charts, visual reminders, checklists, having a specific a place for important items.
- In all environments, knowing what comes next tends to help people manage more effectively and to adapt to change.

Give thorough advance notice about changes

- Provide in writing changes to appointments, projects, shifts and schedules, and expectations.
- In addition to speaking to the person about the change, ensure you are using the communication method the person is most likely to use (text, email, meeting notes, face to face reminder, etc.).
- Give notice of important and/or timely changes through multiple methods (For example, email + text, text + face-to-face, phone message + email). Repeating information can be very helpful.
- If you cannot give advance notice, tell them why the change is happening, what will and will not change, and if they have any choices to make. Then give the individual time (even a few minutes) to process the change, before you ask them to participate in any further conversation about the change.
- Provide time and space for the individual to ask questions specific to the new structure and to clarify expectations.
- Expect that some people may appear initially unwilling or unenthusiastic about unexpected changes. This response is likely because they need more time to process the last-minute change, than about the change itself. Give them time and space as above, and avoid commenting on their initial response.

Minimize and manage unstructured time to make it more predictable

- Support creating a daily plan of work and time.
- Keep a list of tasks readily available and accessible that they can do if they are not busy doing something else.
- When on campus, schedule how down time will be filled (For example, eat lunch in the student union building, study Chemistry in the computer lab, and walk around the campus garden).
- Create a plan for weekend or days with nothing scheduled (For example, do two things that you have to do, two things that are in the direction of your values/what really matters, and one thing that is for fun and recreation).

RECOMMENDED STRATEGIES (CONT.)

Provide structure around social interactions and supports

- Plan for regular check-ins with a supervisor.
- Specifically teach the individual about living, school, or workplace culture including any social expectations or unspoken norms.
- Minimize expectations about participation in unnecessary social interactions.
- Reduce client/customer facing time if necessary.
- Scheduling break or lunch time to reduce social demands.
- When group work is required, ask individuals about their preferred way of collaborating.

Engage in on-going evaluation of existing structures

- Ensure structures that are in place are supportive to all individuals and not additional burdens or barriers to optimal functioning.

Structure includes repetition

- Post schedules, instructions, rules, and reminders somewhere visible and easily accessible.
- Review important information and practice important skills regularly (such as, fire drills and other safety protocols).
- Practice new skills at home (with support as needed) until the person is ready to do the skill independently.
- Allow students to record lectures and ensure course material is available and easily accessible.
- Provide reminders in multiple formats about important dates, projects, etc.
- Upon introducing a new system to support structure (such as, using a calendar to plan and track tasks), take the time and expend the energy to teach the use of the system and practice to ensure the system can and will be used independently. Review regularly and adapt the system if needed.

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